

# Where You Go

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**John Wilkinson**  
**Third Presbyterian Church**  
**November 4, 2018**  
**Ruth 1:1-18**

Please remember to vote Tuesday, regardless of your politics and because of your politics. It matters as an act of citizenship and, I believe, as an act of faith, as a way for our moral commitments to be demonstrated in the world where God calls us.

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Yesterday, the ninth annual East Avenue Grocery Run was another off-the-charts positive experience. 1230 registrants, a near record and an amazing result considering the weather. More than 100 fantastic volunteers guiding all of those walkers and runners through the experience. \$16,000 raised online, a record, with a total of \$44,500 raised for the event from registrations, corporate sponsors and online support. That puts us well over \$250,000 raised in the nine years of the event.

All of that is important. But what is even more important in my mind is the spirit of the day, the glowing comments we receive from participants, and the cause – hunger—we support and our capacity to undergird Third Church’s Dining Room Ministry and Food Cupboard and another 20 food programs in our community. The numbers are important and do so much good, of course, but it’s the story of the Grocery Run that has, in my opinion, an even deeper impact.

Yesterday the team recognized Otto Muller-Girard, Jr. as the Hunger Fighter of the Year, for his decades long work with the Dining Room Ministry – a well-deserved recognition.

The sextons were extremely helpful, especially as we navigated the elements of yesterday morning.

And of course, a huge shout-out to the wonderful Grocery Run dream team, and its leaders Ellen Rye and Jenny Rutkowski, and of all of you who ran or walked or supported financially or gave your time yesterday and throughout. Thank you. We are already planning Grocery Run 2019, our tenth annual, and I am guaranteeing now that the weather will be perfect.

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***Prayer of Remembrance for All Saints Day***

*Eternal God, neither death nor life can separate us from your love. Grant that we may serve you faithfully here on earth and in heaven rejoice with all your saints who ceaselessly proclaim your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.*

We remember: Jean Campbell, Cynthia Coupal, Ann Garrett, Newton H. Green, Angela Johnson, Sarah Lunt, Pete Merrill, Virginia Norton, The Rev. Donald Roth, Mary Schwertz, Betsy Stanton, Natalie Stewart, Judith Stonehill, Lois Tomlinson, Barbara von Berg.

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People every so often ask me how we choose the Bible readings for any given Sunday. I tell them that while do not have prescribed readings, we choose to utilize something called the Common Lectionary, a set of readings put into place several decades ago by an ecumenical committee. An Old Testament reading, a psalm, an epistle/letter portion and a gospel reading for each Sunday. At some churches you will hear all four read. Here, you will hear one or 2.

Though they are not prescribed, I've always appreciated the lectionary. It helps in planning with music and Sunday school. It allows much – certainly not all – of the Bible to be considered in a three-year cycle. And it invites a preacher to consider more broadly material that she or he might not choose if left to their own devices.

My point in telling you this this morning is to let you know that this Sunday and next the lectionary offers the book of Ruth, a personal favorite. It won't come

around again for another three years, so this Sunday and next become a kind of two for one deal.

Read the whole thing this afternoon. It's just a few pages and won't take you more than 10 minutes. You might know Ruth from countless weddings you've attended. That's good, even though it was hardly initially intended for weddings. I will share a summary in a bit, and some themes for us to consider this Sunday and next, but first a story. Actually, two stories...

Presbyterian ordination is a rigorous process, and rightly so. While it can be nurturing and affirming – my process generally was – it can also feel like hoop-jumping. I expect that's true of all professional credentialing experiences.

A bunch of things happen in this process:

- You go to seminary to get a degree, called a Master of Divinity (a name that always amuses me!), typically a three-year degree with Greek and Hebrew and theology and Bible and other assorted delights.
- At the same time, you are under care of a presbytery, who supports you and assesses you and ultimately decides whether you are ready for ordination, or not.
- You take five examinations, called “standard ordination examinations,” “ords” for short. Bible content, biblical interpretation, theology, worship and sacraments, Presbyterian polity and governance. They are a treat.
- Then, after all of that, you have an examination, which includes a thorough exploration of your theological beliefs, and what we call “fitness” for ministry. Depending on the presbytery, these can be fairly friendly or fairly tough moments, these examinations.

I went through the ordination process in Ohio, but since I was being called to a church in Chicago, I was examined by Chicago Presbytery, late in the evening after a very long and presbytery meeting. It was not exactly grueling, but it was not a love fest either. Nevertheless, here I am.

The story about all of that is that in the process of being examined by Chicago Presbytery, I had to preach a sermon, for a committee, in a conference room of an office building. It was hardly worshipful and it was hardly a friendly audience. Nevertheless, again, here I am.

And because I had written one of my standard ordination examinations on the book of Ruth, I decided to preach on it. And I told the committee this story. I told them about my grandparents, my father's parents, Parker and Janet Wilkinson. Parker was a coal miner in Maryland (my other grandfather was a coal miner in West Virginia.) Parker fought in World War I, in Germany and France (my other grandfather, my mom's dad, fought in World War II, in the Pacific theater.). Both grandfathers moved to Akron, Ohio to work at the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, to avoid black lung, to make a better life for their wives and children. And they did.

Parker and Janet became homeowners, living on Goodyear Boulevard, loving parents of my dad, their only child. Active Presbyterians, after Janet pried Parker away from the Methodist church, as happens sometimes!

They celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in 1974. I remember a big party, a wonderful party, in the basement of the church where I had been baptized. Soon thereafter, and very sadly, Janet, my grandmother, became ill. And then quickly, very ill. All I remember is the term which I still have to concentrate to say, "arterial sclerosis."

But what I also remember, what I am thankful for to this day, what I see in you all day in and day out as you care for those you love, an ailing parent, an ailing spouse, a member of this church, what I remember is love. Deep, faithful, steadfast, covenantal love.

The ravages of this illness were difficult, but my grandfather, my coal miner, factory worker, World War I veteran grandfather, would have nothing of it. When the upstairs steps became too difficult to manage, a hospital bed was moved into the living room, and then, for more than a year, this man slept on a couch next to

his beloved, caring for her, feeding her, bathing her, tending to her. Like many men of his generation, he had never cooked a day in his life, but learned to.

It is what we do, what you do, for an ailing parent, or an ailing spouse, or a member of this church. She died, mercifully, and he lived another ten years, driving to church on a Palm Sunday morning, parking, sitting down in his pew and falling asleep never to get up.

What I remember today, and what I told an ordination examination committee in a conference room preaching a sermon, was his story, their story. Unquestioned, un-begrudged, unlimited care, steadfast, covenantal love. Their story.

Which I believe to be Ruth's story, and Naomi's story. It is read at weddings, which is fine, yet it goes deeper than that, broader than that. Again, we will play out the themes more fully next week, including why Ruth matters in very intimate relationships like a marriage or as we care for our aging and ailing parents *and* in broader contexts like the Pulse nightclub or the Mother Emanuel AME Church or the Tree of Life Synagogue.

Here's the first part of a synopsis. There is a famine in the Judean countryside, and a man, Elimelech, takes his wife Naomi and his two sons to the neighboring country of Moab. Elimelech dies soon thereafter. The two sons marry Moabite women – Orpah and Ruth. Then the sons die. You have Naomi, an immigrant, refugee widow, and her two widowed daughters-in-law.

Naomi pleads with her daughters-in-law to return to their lives, to build a new future. They pledge their faithfulness to their mother-in-law. She pleads again, and Orpah returns, acceptably. Ruth stays. Ruth stays. And they return to Bethlehem, where we will conclude the story next Sunday.

But before we do, perhaps we can hear again Ruth's iconic words, her insistent words, with this context – the context of death and grief and fear and an unknown and uncertain future.

“Where you go, I will go.

Where you lodge, I will lodge.

Your people shall be my people.

Your God, my God.”

In the face of extraordinary challenge and threat, Ruth demonstrates extraordinary kindness, loving kindness, covenantal, faithful kindness. She did not have to, by custom and practice and tradition, and by her own mother-in-law’s insistence. She did not have to stay. But she did.

It was that kindness, that love, that I wanted to tell a presbytery committee about in a Chicago meeting room almost 30 years ago. It is that kindness, that love, that you all demonstrate every day as you care for loved ones who are dying. It is that kindness, that love, that we’ve seen on full display in the aftermath of the Tree of Life massacre.

Love, steadfast, covenantal love, that will not wane in the face of debilitating illness or aching fatigue or insurmountable circumstance or hatred or fear. It is how Parker committed to Janet. It is how Ruth committed to Naomi. It is how we commit to one another. It is how God commits to us.

Edward Campbell, my seminary professor, who preached at my first installation service, wrote a classic commentary on Ruth. He writes about Ruth’s “extraordinary, unobtrusive loyalty.” (Page 84) The storyteller, Campbell writes – and this is a grand story in our Year of Stories, is not preachy, but simply tells us a story of what living a responsible, righteous, determined life looks like, in the face of every kind of hardship. (Page 30)

- Given every kind of choice, Ruth chooses love.
- Given the choice of despair or rolling up his sleeves and caring for his dying wife, my grandpa chose love.
- Given the choices of shrugging our shoulders, or worse, at racism and anti-Semitism and homophobia and gun violence, we choose love.

Whether on the grandest of world stages or the granular lives of two ordinary people, we choose love, so that these words become our words: “where you go, I will go...your people shall be my people.” Amen.